

Committee on Resources, Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

[forests](#) - - Rep. Scott McInnis, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6205 - - (202) 226-7736

Witness Statement ; Judy Martz

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, for the record, my name is Judy Martz and I am the Governor of the great state of Montana. It is an honor to be here today to testify on behalf of my state and the Western Governors Association regarding the national fire plan. I want to thank the Chairman for his interest in an issue of critical importance to those of us in the west; the health of our forests.

Let me begin by saying that those of us in Montana are very excited about the prospects of the National Fire Plan. For the first time in nearly a decade, we view the National Fire Plan as a ray of hope for our nation's forests. And the reason we are hopeful lies in the opportunity to work together with our federal partners on solving issues that we witnessed last summer. Devastating and catastrophic fires swept across vast acres of Montana and the west last summer. We need to do everything possible to avoid that scenerio from repeating itself again.

While the smoke has cleared from one of the most devastating fires in our history, we must remain vigilant in our efforts to minimize future devastating fires. Already in Montana, we fear the potential exists for a repeat performance of last year's fires. Drought has hit Montana hard, and the consequences of an extended drought have serious impacts to our natural environment.

In the interior west, the wildfires of 2000 burned nearly 7 million acres. Of the nearly 7 million acres, Montana witnessed over 900,000 acres reduced to ash. The State of Montana watched in horror as over 300 homes were destroyed, and nearly 6000 were threatened. We had over 20 communities evacuated as a result of an out-of-control wildfire.

The Big Sky State fell under a brown hue of smoke. From August 5th to September 8th, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality issued a total of 21 "very unhealthy" advisories and 19 "hazardous" advisories for communities in the northwest part of the state. Visibility hung around 1 mile or less for most of the summer. A state proud of its "clean and healthful" environment had fallen to air quality levels worse than Los Angeles. Environmental groups long opposed to active management fell silent amidst the smoke, chaos and personal trauma of last year's fires.

While we cannot prevent drought, lightening strikes or hot windy days, we can prevent some of the devastating impacts that result from mismanagement and inaction.

In particular, we must manage our national forests. "Hands-off" is not management. We have successfully excluded fire from our landscape for the past 90 years. And while the forest service was quick to respond to fire starts across our nation, they were slowly drifting away from active management of those lands. The result, entire watersheds and landscapes have grown dense with small trees and brush, creating unnatural and unhealthy conditions ripe for catastrophic fires. In fact, the General Accounting Office in a report requested by this subcommittee, identified nearly 40 million acres of national forest land at risk of catastrophic fire within the interior west. Last summer, we burned less than 10% of the acreage identified by

the GAO.

Unless we move aggressively, with a unified plan and strategy, we can expect many more summers like last. While spring has not eased into the intermountain west yet, the impacts from last summer's fires remain to be seen. Impacts to water quality, wildlife habitat, endangered species, erosion and regeneration will play itself out with the coming spring run-off and summer rains

As a nation, we need to move away from the confrontational gridlock we have experienced in the past. I have long maintained that there is no constituency for dirty air and dirty water. We all want a clean environment. But a clean environment does not happen by accident. It happens with measured purpose. And the National Fire Plan is a move in the direction of a cleaner and healthier environment.

By focusing on the health of our forests, we can achieve many of the objectives important to all Americans. Instead of focusing on how much timber we harvest, we need to focus on how much we leave on the land. Instead of focusing on acres harvested or board feet processed, we need to focus on the overall health of the forest ecosystem. We need to manage our forests for an end result; and that end result must be a healthy forest.

Charles Keegan, Director of Forest Industry and Manufacturing Research and Research and Carl Fiedler, Research Associate Professor, School of Forestry, both of the University of Montana, Missoula, have long advocated for healthy forests through active management of our nation's forests.

In a nutshell, Chuck and Carl recommend active management to bring our forests back to a more natural and healthy condition. This management technique involves clearing under-story and over-story of overly crowded trees, and prescribed burning where appropriate. And the key word here is appropriate. Some of our forests have grown dense and have accumulated large amounts of hazardous fuels, making it nearly impossible to prescribe burn. In cases such as this, man needs to mimic the purpose of fire by clearing overgrown and over-accumulated fuels. Only after successful restoration can we introduce fire in its natural form.

The National Fire Plan endeavors to offer a full range of forest management tools, from prescribed burns to mechanical treatment. And by including state and local governments and the affected public to participate in management decisions, we have an honest opportunity to positively affect the health of our nation's forests.

The National Fire Plan moves us in the direction of sustainable and healthy forests. The Forest Service will follow nine Operating Principles guiding their work to implement the National Fire Plan. I am encouraged by the principles outlined and look forward to working with the Forest Service on implementing those principles in Montana.

Responsible agencies must use expedited procedures to implement this plan. I understand the agencies have the available procedures to expedite this plan, and if not, then Congress must act prudently and expeditiously itself to provide legislative language that allows expedited procedures.

We can and we must move in an expeditious manner to address forest management. Last summer's fires affected private and state lands as well. In Montana, we saw over 14,000 acres of state forest burn. Recognizing that the value of burnt, dead timber decreases rapidly with time, our Department of Natural Resources (DNRC) moved in an environmentally sound and fiscally responsible manner. DNRC quickly evaluated the affected resources in accordance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act (similar to

NEPA) and prepared a plan to treat the area's most severely impacted by the fires. Today, the state has completed 90% of the treatment plan on 5400 acres of state land. This treatment plan has rehabilitated many of the burned acres and generated \$3.7 million to the school trust that will be used for our public education system. The harvests were also conducted while adhering to the letter of the State Forest Land Management Plan, which is to manage for biodiversity and forest health, in effect similar to the USFS ecosystem management philosophy.

To date, the United State Forest Service in Montana has not removed any timber affected by the fires of last summer.

Additionally, the treatment plan addressed rehabilitation measures that included soil stabilization measures, stream bank stabilization and reseedling where necessary. This summer, the State will begin the process to evaluate and address necessary treatment of the area's less impacted by the fires.

My point is simple. If the State of Montana can move in a timely, environmentally sound and fiscally responsible manner with limited resources, should we not expect our federal neighbors to do the same?

I would like to present the balance of my testimony on behalf of the 21 members of the Western Governors' Association of which I recently became a member.

Since last summer's fires, states have been working collaboratively with federal agencies and other stakeholders to develop a national 10-year strategy to reduce the risk of wildfires. Western governors requested this strategy and the Congress concurred on the need for this long-term approach in the FY 2001 Interior Appropriations report. A draft of the strategy for public and Congressional comment is appended to my testimony. We are aiming to complete it by May 1. Once completed, we believe this document will demonstrate that a broad range of interests are in agreement on the need, resource levels and approach to addressing this issue.

And I would like to take this opportunity to encourage Congress to remain vigilant in improving the health of our nation's forests. We must be dedicated to a long-term strategy that addresses the health of our forests and reduces the risks to our population. We must, and I repeat must, fully fund the National Fire Plan. The goals set by the National Fire Plan are crucial to minimizing threat to lives and property. We must remain committed for the long run.

We were lucky last year. With the grace of God and a mobilization of forces like we have never before seen, lives were saved and property was protected. Unless we seriously commit to addressing the risks posed by unnatural and unhealthy forests, we will not always be able to say we were so lucky.

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